DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 890 PS 018 960

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TITLE Appropriate Public School Programs for Young Children. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 90
CONTRACT RI88062012
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Involvement; Curriculum; *Early Childhood Education; *Educational Development; Educational Philosophy; Inservice Teacher Education; Parent Participation; *Program Development; *Public Schools
IDENTIFIERS Developmentally Appropriate Programs; ERIC Digests; Screening Programs

ABSTRACT

This digest discusses issues related to the implementation of high quality early childhood education by public school districts. Contents focus on: (1) the development of a written statement of philosophy; (2) the analysis of screening and assessment practices; (3) organization of the learning environment; (4) teacher preparation; (5) parent involvement; (6) collaboration with the community; and (7) ways to sustain programs. It is concluded that public schools can change to better meet the needs of young children. Such changes should be carefully planned and based on research and theory about what is appropriate for young children. Changes should be supported by commitment from the district's decision makers and by an increase in the time allotted for planning, training, and problem solving. Each change can be implemented over a period of time so that those involved have time to make preparations. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

PS-EDO-4-90

PS 019960

Appropriate Public School Programs for Young Children

Carolyn Cummings

Public school districts are examining practices in early childhood education in response to recommendations about school entry, developmentally appropriate curriculum, testing, and reform in elementary schools. Current research and positions (see reference list) are critical of the practices of:

- denying entry to kindergarten,
- assigning children to differentiated kindergartens and transition first grades based on results of screening instruments (which are often not standardized),
- using an inflexible, highly structured, teacher-directed curriculum with many paper and pencil tasks,
- using total-group instruction,
- placing emphasis on skills taught in isolation, and
- using widespread retention, referrals, or assignment to remedial classes if expectations are not met.

Many public school districts are making changes to ensure that curricula are responsive to children's developmental needs and programs are responsive to the more comprehensive needs of children and their families. Each district needs to consider certain issues in its efforts to provide high-quality early childhood education. A discussion of these issues follows.

Philosophy

After a school district reviews current research, literature, and position statements, the district is ready to write a philosophy that is consistent with its beliefs about young children's development and learning and programs that are appropriate for young children. It is advisable to have a variety of people write the philosophy and have the whole staff review it before it is published. Board of education approval demonstrates the board's commitment to staff, parents, and the community, and provides a focus for other decisions relating to the program.

Screening

Next, districts or schools can begin to analyze screening and assessment practices. Schools that once used results of screening to prevent children from entry or to assign them to an extra year of kindergarten now provide equal access to kindergarten based on the state's chronological age requirement. These schools offer developmentally appropriate kindergartens to all children of entry age, and use screening only to plan programs for children.

Curriculum

Curriculum includes the concepts and information children are expected to learn and the manner in which they learn. Arrangement of the physical learning environment, learning materials, schedules, learning centers, small group projects, and integrated, thematic learning experiences all provide ways for children to learn.

Schedules need to provide for long periods of uninterrupted time for children to make choices about their learning and work alone or in small groups. Supplementary staff members, such as art and music teachers and Chapter I consultants, should be encouraged to work with children in the classroom setting rather than teach or present content to children for 15-20 minute segments, often in isolation from the total group.

Content should be integrated and relevant so that children learn in lifelike situations. Such situations involve the use of concrete experiences and real materials. Money that was previously spent on workbooks, ditto paper, and textbook series can instead be used to purchase open-ended materials for the classroom.

When in-depth development of concepts is promoted and children are no longer expected to master isolated skills and lists of facts, changes will need to be made in the manner in which achievement is reported to parents. Report cards listing bits of information and letter or symbol grades are considered inappropriate for young children. Reports should emphasize what children can do rather than what they cannot. Anecdotal records and samples of children's work can be used. Achievement tests that measure specific skills are no longer considered valid measures of what children have learned. The curriculum and methods used to assess progress are no longer

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thought to be synonymous with the textbook series or grade-level achievement tests that have been used in the past.

Teacher Preparation

Because many public school teachers have not had preservice training in dealing with young children and state certification requirements for teaching primary grades differ markedly, many teachers need information and training about developmental needs of young children. Many need to learn about setting up activity areas, managing children during child-choice time, organizing small group projects, and integrating learning activities. Strategies and techniques used with young children differ from those used in the upper elementary grades. An elementary teacher does not always have the skills and confidence necessary to teach children of 3-8 years. Districts cannot assume that all teachers are prepared to make the changes that they will need to make in order to improve the quality of programs. Districts must provide not only information and training, but also materials and time for planning and group problem solving.

Parent Involvement

In high-quality early childhood programs there is a frequent exchange of information between parent and school about the child, parenting, education, and community services. Parents take an active part in their child's program and make decisions about their child's learning. Each district and each school needs to have a commitment and action plan for parent involvement. The plan should provide opportunities for staff training and planning by staff.

Collaboration with the Community

Public schools need to broaden the idea of education by collaborating with other programs and agencies in the community to provide the best programs for children and their families. For example, schools can meet young families' needs for before- and after-school child care by offering alternatives in transportation, scheduling, or building use. School and business partnerships may provide for alternative scheduling that allows for increased contributions for child care or parent involvement. Staff and parents can increase their awareness of available services for families by working with other agencies in the community. Such collaboration may even result in services being made available at the school site.

There are many advantages to a partnership between public school staff and staff from other private and public programs for young children for the purpose of professional development. A collegial partnership in which information and expectations are shared can help parents and children make smooth transitions from one program to another.

Ways to Sustain Programs

Public schools need to make plans to support and sustain changes that are made. Schools can schedule time for grade-level meetings to assess changes and make further improvements. A professional development plan and an evaluation component can also be established.

Conclusion

Public schools can make changes to better meet the needs of young children. Such changes need to be carefully planned and based on research and theory about what is appropriate for young children. Changes should be supported by commitment from the district's decision-makers and time for planning, training, and problem-solving. Each change can be implemented over a period of time so that those involved have time to make preparations.

For More Information:

Bredekamp, S. (ed.). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987.

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This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI.